The Presbyterian System

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The Presbyterian System

Its Characteristics, Authority, and Obligation

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Prefatory Note.

This brief treatise is an endeavor to set forth, in a clear and definite manner, the characteristics, authority and obligation of the Presbyterian System. The controlling idea of that System, the Sovereignty of God, is exhibited in its influence thereupon, both in its parts and as a whole. The main features, as contained in the Westminster Standards, are developed concisely under the heads of Theology, Duty, Worship and Government. The extent of the authority of these Standards over members and officers of the Presbyterian Church, and the general and individual obligations involved in their acceptance, are also indicated. The treatise is submitted to the public, in the hope that it will prove helpful to a clear understanding of the nature and relations of the Presbyterian System, both as to faith and practice.

W. H. R.

The Presbyterian System.

A systematic exhibit of Scriptural teaching, both as to faith and practice, is in accordance alike with the letter and spirit of the word of God. Thus believing, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America has framed forms of sound words containing the principles and usages which it maintains. In these pages an endeavor is made concisely to exhibit that system of truth which is contained in the Standards of the Church, or, otherwise worded, to answer the question, What are the leading characteristics of the Presbyterian system of faith and practice?

I. **The controlling idea.** In dealing with the Presbyterian system, it is necessary first, to lay to one side any narrow

view of it that may have been acquired. By the word "Presbyterian" is not meant simply an adherent of a particular form of church government; and the term "Presbyterian system" is therefore not to be understood as applicable merely to a code of rules, by which the affairs of an ecclesiastical organization are administered. A system, whether of philosophy or theology, may be defined as a classification of related truths arranged under one and the same idea. No truth is altogether isolated, every truth is related to some other, and the harmonious relation of connected truths each to the other, under a common idea, is their presentation in the form of a system. A system of truth must be judged, not by any of its parts, neither by mere incidental characteristics, but by all the parts in their logical relation to the controlling idea.

The doctrine of the divine sovereignty is the controlling idea of the Presbyterian system, both theoretically and practically. By this sovereignty is meant, the absolute control of the universe, with all that it has

contained, does and will contain, whether visible things or invisible things, by the one supreme, eternal, omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent Spirit, for wise, just, holy and loving ends, known fully to himself alone.

The Presbyterian system may be defined, therefore, as being that body of religious truths and laws of which the sovereignty of God is the germ and nexus, the life and soul.

II. **The organizing principle.** The sovereignty of God finds primary expression in the Presbyterian system, by ordaining as its organizing principle, the sovereignty of the word of God, as the norm and rule of faith and practice. When men seek to know what to believe and do, it is natural that they should seek to ascertain first, whether God, the Supreme Spirit, who is eternal truth, has spoken to them authoritatively in both particulars.

Christendom in general maintains that God has spoken to man, and that the result is to be found in the Holy Scripture. While Christians, in general, however,

regard the Bible as being the word of God, it is not regarded by all claiming the Christian name as the supreme rule of belief and conduct. Nominal Christians are divided on this great subject into four classes, commonly known as Rationalists, Liberals, Catholics, and Evangelicals. Rationalists deny that the Bible is in any proper sense the word of God. Liberals, many of whom are evangelical, affirm that the word of God is contained in the Holy Scripture, but they deny that the Holy Scripture as an entirety is the word of God. Further, some of them regard the human reason as a source of authority in religion, coördinate with Scripture. Catholics (so-called) take a different view of the Scripture as the rule of faith, from that of the Rationalists. Whether of the Greek Catholic, the Roman Catholic, or the Anglican communion, they maintain that the Bible is the word of God, but in addition hold that the traditions and the voice of the Church are coördinate with the Bible as sources of religious authority. The natural result of this tendency ever

has been to substitute for the Holy Scripture the commandments of men and the decrees of church councils.

Against the three above mentioned opinions, evangelical Christians make resolute stand. In opposition to the first two they maintain that the Bible in its totality is the "very word of God;" that in its every part it is the divinely inspired, infallible, and supreme rule of faith and practice. In opposition to the Catholics, they reject utterly the traditions of men from the rule of faith, and take as their watchword the motto, "The Bible, and the Bible only, the religion of Protestants." The position taken is this: That the sovereignty of God involves the sovereignty of God's word. Granted, that God has revealed his truth to men in the Scripture, then it follows, necessarily, that neither the conclusions of the finite human reason, nor the decrees of an infallible church or Pope, but alone God's word, can be the inerrant and supreme rule of faith and life. When men have ascertained that a given book is the word of

God, then because God has spoken, they must accept it as supremely authoritative in all its parts. Face to face with God's word, the human reason is to deal, not with questions of acceptance, but of interpretation. The Presbyterian position is one here with the evangelical position, declaring that the supreme and infallible rule of faith and practice is the whole Bible, and the Bible only. The Presbyterian system accepts and incorporates, as of perpetual binding obligation, only those things which can be proven to be of Scriptural origin and warrant. And this is the reason why its great organizing principle finds statement in the first chapter of the Westminster Confession. Presbyterians put first in their creed, the rule which determines what shall be included in and what excluded from their Standards, state first their doctrine "Of the Holy Scripture."

III. **The right of denominational association.** The acceptance of the word of God as the supreme and infallible rule of faith and practice, brings men next face

to face with the questions, "What is the relation of the individual to the interpretation of God's word, and what also is the relation thereto of Christians as organized into denominations?" The first inquiry is answered in the Presbyterian Standards from the position, that the sovereignty of God involves the principle that "God alone is Lord of the conscience." To God, as Master, every man standeth or falleth. Because God is sovereign, therefore is the Scripture the supreme rule of faith and practice, and therefore, also, is every Christian entitled to interpret the Scripture for himself, in accordance with the precepts which are given therein. Before creeds are formulated, or organization begins, or church constitutions are framed, evangelical religion, as expressed in its Presbyterian form, brings God and the human soul into direct contact, without any intervening obstacles, arising from the processes of the human reason or the declarations of any church. In the Presbyterian Standards this fact is stated in the following words: "God alone is Lord of the conscience,

and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to his word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship.* Therefore they consider the rights of private judgment, in all matters that respect religion, as universal and unalienable."†

The right of private judgment, thus sharply announced, involves, however, not only the right of every man to interpret, with due reverence towards God, the Scripture for himself, but also the right of every man to enter into association with other men, for the attainment of the high and holy ends of the Christian religion. Discussion as to the value of denominational church organizations is out of place here, but it is insisted that they are warranted both by human nature and the Scripture. Sufficient is it to point out the position which the Presbyterian Church takes in the matter. It declares in the Form of Government, Chapter i, Section 2, "That, in perfect consistency with the

*Confession, XX, 2.
†Form of Government, I, 1.

above principle of common right [*i. e.*, private judgment], every Christian church, or union or association of particular churches, is entitled to declare the terms of admission into its communion, and the qualifications of its ministers and members, as well as the whole system of its internal government which Christ hath appointed: that, in the exercise of this right they may, notwithstanding, err, in making the terms of communion either too lax or too narrow; yet, even in this case, they do not infringe upon the liberty, or the rights of others, but only make an improper use of their own."

By virtue, therefore, of the twin rights of private judgment and voluntary association, those professing Christians known as Presbyterians have voluntarily combined together, agreeably to the Holy Scripture, for the maintenance of what they are convinced is the Scriptural system of faith and practice, of worship and administration. If Presbyterians err in claiming that the Presbyterian system is the Scriptural system, or in adopting and maintaining this

system, then, "they do not infringe upon the liberty, or the rights of others, but only make an improper use of their own." Presbyterians, however, with all due respect to those who differ from them, believe that the views held by them are Scriptural, and therefore require from ministers, ruling elders, and deacons, at ordination, the sincere reception and adoption of the denominational Confession of Faith, and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, as containing the "system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures," and equally sincere approval of the Form of Government, and the other administrative standards of the Church.

IV. **The main features** of the Presbyterian system. The statement of these features follows naturally after the considerations just presented. The lines of development are those common to all religions—theology, duty, worship and government.

1. *Theology.* The fundamental feature of the Presbyterian system is a body of theology, or a statement of what we are to believe concerning God, in himself, and

in his relations to man. The general name "Calvinistic" has been given to this body of theology, but the term does not express the whole truth with reference thereto. While every doctrine in the system has its origin in the word of God, and while its form of statement is controlled by the idea of the divine sovereignty, nevertheless there are doctrines in the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms other than those which are peculiarly Calvinistic. The Presbyterian doctrinal Standards contain three great theological elements, each of which is entitled to a distinctive name. The first element consists of the doctrines generally held by all Christians, the second of the doctrines maintained by all Protestants, the third of those doctrines which are peculiarly Calvinistic. The general or universal Christian element consists of such doctrines as those of the existence of God, of the unity of God, of the Trinity, of the plan of God, of creation, of providence, of the fall of man, of sin and its punishment, of the freedom of the human will, of the person of Christ, of

the personality of the Holy Ghost, of salvation through a divine Redeemer, and of the resurrection of the dead. Upon such doctrines as these, in their general form, however they may vary in particulars, Christians are substantially a unit. The second great element, the Protestant, consists of such doctrines as, the supremacy of the Holy Scripture as the only inspired and infallible rule of faith, the lordship of God over the conscience, the vicarious sacrifice and sole mediatorship of Christ, the justification of the penitent sinner by faith alone, the passing of saints at death immediately into heaven, and their instant and complete perfection in the state of glory. Such doctrines as these unite evangelical Protestants in their several subdivisions in a vital oneness of faith. The third element in the Confession is the distinctively Calvinistic, and consists of the doctrines which are ordinarily called the five points of Calvinism. These five points are: (1) Unconditional as opposed to conditional predestination; (2) definite atonement or particular redemption as opposed

to indefinite atonement; (3) total as opposed to partial depravity; (4) efficacious as opposed to uncertain grace; (5) final as opposed to partial perseverance. These five points are the differentiating features of the Reformed or Presbyterian doctrine, the points which separate Calvinists from other evangelical Christians. Many Baptists and Congregationalists, and some Episcopalians and Methodists, are, on the five points of Calvinism, theologically at one with Presbyterians.

The controlling idea of the Presbyterian system, that of the sovereignty of God, is vitally related to each of these elements of confessional theology. The several universal doctrines referred to, and set forth in the Confession, affirm reverently and emphatically that God is; that he exists as a Trinity in unity; that he is the eternal, infinitely holy, wise and good, omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent Spirit; that from all eternity he planned his universe, with all things therein; that he created all things; that he governs all things; that the free will of man is his gift, involving

man's responsibility to his Creator; that he permitted sin and has fixed its punishment; that salvation from sin is by him of whom it is written: "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish;" that all men shall rise one day from the dead, and shall receive at the bar of God the awards of final destiny.

The Protestant element in the Confession is also controlled by the divine sovereignty as its dominating idea. Because God is sovereign, therefore Presbyterians believe that God's word is the only inspired and infallible rule of faith; that every man is directly responsible in matters of religion to God; that there is no other method of salvation for sinners than through the sacrifice and mediation of Jesus Christ; that not good works, but faith in the God-man, Jesus Christ, is the sole condition of salvation; and last, but not least, that a middle state after death has no existence, but that there are only two places wherein departed souls abide—heaven and hell. Protestant Christians do not believe that the Church

or the human reason are sources of divine authority in religion; that men can exercise compulsion in matters of belief; that sinners can be saved in any other way except through Christ; that the grace of God can be purchased with good works; that believers must wait a long period after the death of the body for the advent of the hour, when the gates of pearl shall open and admit them to the Saviour's real presence. Because God is sovereign, therefore is the Bible the supreme law, man responsible to God, salvation conditioned alone upon faith, the grace of God without money and without price, and heaven an immediate certainty at the close of the earthly life.

In the Calvinistic element of the Confession, we find the same magnifying of the divine sovereignty which has characterized the two preceding classes of Christian doctrine. The famous five points of Calvinism are simply the affirmation of the sovereignty of God in its relation to the salvation of the individual. For Presbyterians, the salvation of every believer is

from all eternity a part of the great plan of him, without whom not even a sparrow falleth to the ground. Presbyterians believe, in regard to every true Christian, that his salvation is not a reward for faith, but that faith and salvation both are gifts of God; that each believer is the object of a peculiar, definite, gracious, costly, victorious and everlasting love; that the power and tendency of sin in man is of such a nature that he is utterly unable to save himself; that regeneration is an act of God, and of God alone, a sinner cannot be both father and child; that when the Spirit of God moves efficaciously in a human soul, the new life must result; and that the soul whom God hath loved in Jesus Christ, he loveth to the end, the regenerate person is not of the number of those "who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul."* Calvinism makes him who is the author of the universe to be the author of salvation; maintains that the love of God in Christ, the love even unto death, deals not with

*Heb. x. 39.

men in the mass, but with each soul in particular; that he who is the source of all life and love bestows efficaciously upon utterly helpless man both life and grace; and that once a child of God, always a child of God. God's plan, God's love, God's life, God's promise, God's power, make salvation for the believer not a mere arbitrary necessity, but a most gracious and glorious certainty. Arranged in an order determined by man's lost estate in sin, the five points of Calvinism start with man's inability, owing to sin, to save himself, and then describe the four steps in salvation: predestination, redemption, conversion, and sanctification culminating in glorification. Here is Calvinism in its original form: "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out."* "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand."† "Now

* John vi. 37. † John x. 28.

unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen."*

The Presbyterian theology is consistent from beginning to end. Acknowledging the divine sovereignty in all things, both in nature, in providence and in grace, it refers whatsoever comes to pass to the good pleasure of God. Rationalism gives the control of the universe and all it contains to blind, unintelligent natural forces. Rationalism ends either in deism, infidelity or fatalism. Arminianism makes man to a large extent the arbiter of destiny, and so cripples faith and dims hope by introducing, as controlling factors in the universal scheme of things, the whims and waywardness and uncertainty inherent in human nature. The Presbyterian system maintains, that the all-wise, all-knowing, almighty, everywhere present, just, loving, supreme and eternal Spirit, has created and

*Jude 25.

does uphold, has guided and will continue to guide, the whole universe, in all its parts, as well tiny flowret as flaming sun, as well sinful man as holy archangel, until the divine purposes shall find their consummation in the deliverance from the bondage of corruption of a groaning and travailing creation. Presbyterians believe that beneath, above, around, and in all of this scheme of things which we call the universe, in its parts as well as in its totality, in its past, its present and its future, there has been, is, and will be, a dominant will, a kingly righteousness, an imperial love, the will, the righteousness, the love, which is God. They believe neither in fate nor in man as the supreme arbiter of destiny, but in God the Father Almighty.

2. *Duty.* Another class of the essential doctrines of the Presbyterian system deals with human duty. Moral principles and precepts are laid down therein with great clearness. There is no uncertain sound in the statements of the Standards as to the laws and characteristics of human conduct. The chief doctrines concerning duty are

those of the free agency of man, of the law of God, of sin, of faith in Christ, of good works, of Christian liberty, of lawful oaths and vows, of the civil magistrate, of marriage and divorce, and of final judgment. These doctrines also are placed in logical relation to the divine sovereignty. Presbyterians affirm because God is sovereign, therefore, that man's free agency is a foreordained element of his being and involves his responsibility to God; that the moral law as contained in the Ten Commandments, and amplified in the New Testament, is always binding upon men; that all human conduct in thought, word or deed, which is contrary to God's law, is sin; that faith in Christ is obligatory upon all who hear the gospel; that men may not bind the consciences of other men as to right and wrong, except in harmony with God's word; that Christians must show forth by godly living the truth of their profession of religion; that good works are the test and evidence of adoption into the household of God, not a ground for salvation; that men cannot bind them-

selves to perform wrongful acts; that God's name is ever to be held in supreme reverence; that the State is a divine institution as well as the Church; that obedience to rightful civil authority is obedience to God; that in both Church and State the family is the source and safeguard of true prosperity; in short, that the precepts governing men in their relations to each other, whether personal, social, political or ecclesiastical, are to be in full agreement with the principles laid down in the word of God. And to give resistless power to these views of duty, Calvinism emphasizes sharply the predestinated and unescapable judgment of God, the certainty that every thought, word and deed of each individual, in every circumstance and relation of life, will be subjected, at the day of final accounting, to the scrutiny of a justice omniscient, impersonal, impartial, and inflexible, to be followed by a sentence positively righteous and irrevocable.

Concise expression to these views of responsibility is given in our Saviour's words, setting human duty clearly in the

light of the divine sovereignty: "The Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."* "But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment."† True duty, both Godward and manward, is rooted in and controlled by the idea of the divine sovereignty, as it affects human responsibility.

Certain persons, connected with other denominations, have alleged that the Presbyterian system minifies human responsibility and makes of man a mere machine. Such an allegation, deliberately made, is a slander upon Presbyterians, and is rooted in an utter misconception of the nature of the system they maintain. Calvinism, it is true, rightly magnifies the divine sovereignty, but in so doing it also magnifies both man and duty. Every

* Mark xii. 29-31. † Matt. xii. 36.

thought which enlarges and makes more impressive the idea of the sovereignty of God, has like effect in relation to the conceptions of man and of obligation. The more clearly God is perceived and acknowledged as sovereign, the more sharply are the facts apprehended and applied, that man is a predestinated free agent, that right conduct is a divine and perpetual obligation, that responsibility is a thing foreordained, that the judgment of God is inevitable, and that freedom from condemnation is secured only through Christ. God's sovereignty, God's law, God's justice, in combination with human freedom, make Presbyterian views of duty a moral force both stern and mighty.

Loyal to the conception of the sovereignty over human life of the law of God, Calvinists have carried that law into practical operation in conduct, beyond every other class of Christians. The word "Puritan," standing as it does for Calvinistic morality, is sufficient evidence of this fact, in relation to private life, without quoting other and extended proofs. Not

only in private, however, but also in public life, has Calvinism been an intense moral force. The general influence of Presbyterianism, that foremost Englishman, Wm. E. Gladstone, describes as securing for men, "the advantages which in civil order belong to local self-government and representative institutions, orderly habits of mind, respect for adversaries and some of the elements of the judicial temper; the development of a genuine individuality, together with the discouragement of mere arbitrary will and of all eccentric tendencies; the sense of common life and the disposition energetically to defend it; the love of law, combined with the love of freedom." True Calvinism has been and is a most potent source of good to both the individual and the State, in the one of right conduct, and in the other of social order. Its choicest products are the God-fearing believer and the law-abiding citizen. Faith in Christ and obedience to God work ever obedience to law.

3. *Worship.* Worship necessarily occu-

pies a prominent position in the Christian Church, as to persons, places, times and forms. Worship may be defined as the aspiration of the soul of man towards God, in the name of Christ, adoring the divine perfections, magnifying the divine goodness, and supplicating the divine blessing, in the forgiveness of sin and the bestowal of the divine favor. To many persons, worship constitutes the very essence of religion, and in no other department of religion have men attempted to interfere with the divine sovereignty more persistently and audaciously.

The main doctrines of the Presbyterian Standards with reference to worship are: That God only is to be worshiped; that he is to be worshiped through Jesus Christ alone; that worship to be accepted of God must be offered in spirit and in truth, by the help of the Holy Ghost; that only in true worship can sin be forgiven or the divine favor be secured; that no part of religious worship is under the gospel "tied unto" any place; that God hath appointed one day in seven for a Sabbath,

to be kept holy unto him; and that the general manner of worship has been set forth in the word of God. In these doctrines, as in other doctrines dealt with in the Standards, the controlling idea is that of the divine sovereignty. Because God is sovereign, therefore it follows that all idolatry is utterly forbidden; that worship is to be offered, not through human or angelic mediators, but through Jesus Christ as the sole mediator and only priest; that ministers are never priests, but simply leaders in worship; that neither man nor angel can forgive sins and bestow grace and favor, but God alone; that true worship can be offered anywhere, for the road to the divine favor starts from the penitent heart and believing soul, not from Gerizim or from Jerusalem; that the law of the Sabbath as a day for worship is of perpetual obligation; that only those ordinances and forms are of authority in worship which are indicated in the word of God; that worship is to be offered not only in private, but also in stated public assemblies; that the ordinances and forms of religion are

simply means to the great ends of growth in the divine life, and fellowship with God; and that even the sacraments of Christ's appointment, precious as they are to the believer, though the culmination of divine worship, the veritable contact of the soul with Christ, yet have in themselves no efficacy, but are made efficacious only through the blessing of the triune God.

Concisely stated, in another manner, the Presbyterian system in its principles of worship may be set forth thus: No object of worship except God; no priest other than Christ; no forgiveness except for the truly penitent; no obstacle to the divine favor other than unbelief; no worship except in spirit and in truth; no forms other than those prescribed in Scripture. Sweeping away all mere human expedients, Calvinism places the hand of the believing worshiper in the hand of Christ, and brings him face to face with the everlasting Father, to hear, for the sake of Christ, the satisfying and reconciling words: "Son, daughter, thy sin is forgiven thee; go in peace."

The great principles, just stated, have resulted in those plain and simple forms of worship which have been a part of the testimony and the glory of the Presbyterian churches for many generations. As against Romanists and Ritualists, Presbyterians insist that the worship of saints and angels is an assault upon the glory of God, that priests are usurpers of the power of Christ, that obligatory liturgies are unwarranted in the Scriptures, and a hindrance to true worship. Believing absolutely in the divine sovereignty, practically applying both that doctrine and the authority of the Scriptures to worship, the Presbyterian churches have insisted always upon that untrammeled liberty in worship which is the direct outcome of the principles both of the Old and the New Testaments. The God who is the author of all essential Christian doctrine, is the God who invites to prayer and supplication every soul of man. The way to God has been obstructed, however, in the past, by many a barrier of human contrivance, and Calvinists have striven with might and main, through trial,

misrepresentation, wounds and death, to keep unbarred by man the way of access to the throne of the heavenly grace. May the Calvinists of to-day unite with those of the past, in steadfast maintenance of the liberty in worship wherewith Christ hath made men free!

4. *Government.* Church government is not in its essential features a matter of human expediency. The Church was established of God in the earth for the preservation, maintenance and dissemination of his truth, and is both the pillar and the ground of that truth. Originating in a divine warrant, the nature of the Church and its general features are clearly indicated in the word of God.

The principal doctrines the Presbyterian system teaches in relation to the Church and its form of government are those of the headship of Christ; of the union of all true believers to Christ as their Head; of the appointment by Christ of a government in his Church; of the right of all believers as members of Christ's body to participation in church affairs; of the authority of

the Church to discipline offenders and administer government; of the right of Christians to voluntarily associate together in denominations, and to prescribe terms of communion; and of the unity and independence of the Church. The divine sovereignty determines both the order and form of statement, likewise, of these doctrines. Because God is sovereign, therefore is Christ the only Head of the Church, and therefore, also, it follows, that all who are united to him, are members of the ideal Church invisible, existing in heaven and on earth, composed of all the elect; that all persons who profess the true religion are members of the visible and universal Church on earth; that all church power is ministerial and declarative, ministerial as the Church acts for Christ, declarative as it interprets the law of Christ contained in Scripture; that the terms of admission to the Church are to be such only as Scripture prescribes; that only such permanent officers are to be appointed in the Church as the word of God requires; that ministers, as the representatives of Christ, are

brethren one of another; that the people of Christ are entitled to participation in the government of the Church; that the Church possesses the power to exclude offenders, and to regulate the conduct of her members; that the Church, being composed, not of disconnected and independent units, but of units so related to each other that they are parts of a great whole, veritable members of one body, has the right to regulate and supervise all its parts, whether they be church-members or particular congregations; that denominations are in harmony with both the Scripture and the true unity of the Church, each fulfilling its own God-given mission; and, finally, that the State has no power over the Church.

These principles, as applied in the Presbyterian system, result in the production of a Church organization whose main features are the following: Jesus Christ the only head of the Church; ministers peers one of another; authority always positively vested, not in individuals, such as bishops, but in representative courts; the affairs of

local congregations administered jointly by pastors and by officers chosen by the people, called ruling elders and deacons; the general interests of the Church controlled by representative bodies, viz.: presbyteries, synods and general assemblies; the law of Christ contained in the Scripture acknowledged as the law of the Church; the terms of admission identical with the terms of salvation; discipline exercised only for offenses directly against or clearly inferred from the word of God; all denominations holding the essentials of the Christian religion recognized as churches of Christ; and the ideal ecclesiastical organization a free Church in a free State.

Put in negative form, these features may be stated as follows: No other head of the Church than Christ; no monopoly of authority by ministers; no government by prelates; no source of law other than the Bible; no denial of popular right; no bar to church membership other than unbelief; no exclusion except for offenses against Scripture; no adoption of general rules without the coöperation of the whole body

of associated churches; no denial of Christian character to any persons who profess the true Christian religion. and no interference by the State with the Church. Thus is there, in relation to Christ, obedience; in connection with the ministry, equality; in regard to popular rights, due recognition; in legislation and discipline, submission to divine law; in the management of affairs, wisdom combined with efficiency; in church fellowship, acknowledgment of all believers as brethren; and in connection with the State, freedom.

The principles above outlined are the basis for the conviction that the Presbyterian government—on its divine side, the kingdom of Christ; on its human side, a republic—is a government adapted to the needs of man, and in full harmony with the requirements of Holy Scripture. These doctrines have influenced powerfully the form of several of the leading Christian denominations, have permeated modern society, and have modified largely political institutions in many lands. The bulwark of civil and religious liberty in the past, it

is believed that they will determine the form of that one Church of the future which is the common hope of all Christian believers. That Church, when it appears, will maintain the parity of the ministry, the equality of believers, the supremacy of the Scriptures, and the sole headship of Christ.

The general value of the Presbyterian system may be concisely stated thus:

In its theology it honors the divine sovereignty without denying human freedom; in its views of human duty, while insisting upon obedience to God, it emphasizes human responsibility; in its worship, it magnifies God while it brings blessing to man, by maintaining the right of free access on the part of every soul to him whose grace cannot be fettered in its ministrations by any human ordinance whatever; and in its government it exalts the headship of Christ, while giving full development to the activities of the Christian people. From its beginning to its close the system acknowledges God as sovereign, and in its every part is affirmed to

be in harmony with the teachings of God's word. Its twin symbols are "An open Bible" and "The Burning Bush," burning yet not consumed.

V. **The extent of the authority** of the Presbyterian system. The Presbyterian Church adopted in 1729, the Westminster Doctrinal Standards, and in 1788, the entire Constitution, substantially as it now exists. As a result of these acts of the whole Church, while formal approval of the Presbyterian system is not required of church-members, it is none the less true that the Standards are the regularly adopted law of the Presbyterian Church both for members and officers, the common rule in theology, duty, worship and administration. Like the Constitution of the United States, the Constitution of the Church is the heritage, law and guide of all persons within its jurisdiction. While the oath of office is required only of officers, simply because they are officers, the obligation of obedience to the Constitution and constitutional authority is binding upon all. Further, the only authority which can

change or modify in any particular these Standards, is the authority by which they were established. Individuals cannot in the Church any more than in the State change the terms of a law or laws at their own will. The Presbyterian system is, both in its doctrines and regulations, subject to change only by the Church. Again, to the Church belongs not only the right of modification, but also the right of interpretation. Members and officers of a denomination cannot read into any portion of its Constitution their own opinions. In the civil sphere of action the interpretation of law belongs to courts of civil law, and similarly in all Christian churches the interpretation of denominational law is vested in denominational authorities. Both as to the modification and interpretation of the Constitution, the authority of the Presbyterian Church in its courts is unique and absolute.

The relation of ministers, ruling elders and deacons to the Presbyterian system is fixed legally by the Church in its Standards. Prior to induction into office,

these officers are under the control of that Constitution which at ordination they formally and officially accept. The formulas of subscription contained in the Form of Government are not, when answered affirmatively by church officers, an original acceptance of the Presbyterian system, but an official pledge of loyalty to that system as the law of the Church. Further, the terms and conditions of the acceptance of office have been of right formulated by the Church. The Adopting Act of 1729 prescribed that Presbyteries should not receive any candidate or minister into fellowship, "but what declared his agreement in opinion with all the essential and necessary articles of said Confession and Catechisms;" and also enacted that every minister or candidate having scruples with respect to "any article or articles," whether essential or non-essential to the system, should at the time of his making the declaration above referred to, also "declare his sentiments to the Presbytery." In addition, the act made the presbytery the judge, whether the scruple or mistake

of an applicant for reception was about articles "not essential and necessary in doctrine, worship or government." This act of 1729 is substantially repeated in the subscription pledges for officers, found in the Form of Government. A principle was thus established, and has been maintained both by usage and law, which requires every candidate, minister or church-officer, who differs at any point from the Presbyterian system, at ordination or reception, to declare his sentiments to the presbytery under whose jurisdiction he will or may be, and vests the power of interpretation as to doctrine and usage in the presbytery, subject to appeal to the higher courts. The right of the Church to determine the qualifications of candidates for office and to require pledges of faithfulness is at once constitutional, natural and undebatable.

The formal adoption of the Presbyterian system by the Presbyterian Church, involves also that the fundamentals of the system cannot rightfully be changed. Where such fundamental principles are

not involved, submission to the will of the majority is the American rule in the Church as well as in the State. Even majorities, however, are powerless lawfully to change the great features of the Presbyterian system. While non-essential matters in worship, and in polity, while forms of statement of doctrine, are subject to the will of constitutional majorities, the essential and necessary doctrines, whether of faith, worship or government, are not thus subject. The revision of the Presbyterian Standards is permissible along non-essential lines, by new forms of doctrinal statement, by the elimination of features unessential to the system, by the adding of new chapters for the fuller exhibition of old truths, or the alteration of administrative regulations. In such lines as these, alterations or amendments are always in order when they are properly introduced and carried in a constitutional manner. But the great doctrines and essential features of the system cannot be eliminated from the Standards, or suppressed, or abandoned. The Constitution of the Presby-

terian Church cannot be so revised as to episcopize its polity, romanize its worship, decalvinize its theology, deny the co-equal deity of our blessed Lord, nullify his atonement for sin by making the death upon the cross some other thing than a vicarious sacrifice, maintain the justification of the believer on any other ground than faith, declare the certain salvation of the non-elect and unbelieving, or take any other organizing principle than that of the supremacy of the divine word. By original organization, by the Adopting Act of 1729, by reunion twice consummated, first in 1758, and second in 1869; by its Constitution, by civil charters as well as by ecclesiastical acts, the Presbyterian Church is a non-episcopal, non-priestly, democratic, Calvinistic and Protestant Church of Christ, and such it must remain. To change these fundamentals would be revolution.

VI. **The obligation involved.** The Presbyterian Church having permanently adopted the Presbyterian system, the common duty of Presbyterians can be stated in one word, the word "loyalty."

Church officers and church-members are to hold fast those fundamental forms of sound words which are their law. The Presbyterian system is one which has been accepted and adopted with the understanding that acceptance implies loyalty. No man would endeavor, in this present age, to encroach upon that right of private judgment, which is the indefeasible prerogative of every person. Encroachment, however, upon the right of private judgment is one thing, and self-limitation of that right by voluntary adherence to the Standards of a denomination is quite another. No man can compel another to enter any religious denomination, or to accept office therein; but men do constantly enter into engagements which involve the limitation of the rights of the individual by the regulations of a denomination. The natural right of man to liberty, for instance, is conceded as a theory in civil affairs, but our organized social system, of necessity, limits this right to a considerable extent. What is true in the State is truer in the Church.

Civil allegiance in this free republic is obligatory, whether he will or no, upon every citizen. The great majority of American citizens have become such involuntarily, having been born into the nation. In a denominational church, however, both membership and office are things voluntary. It is by a voluntary act that membership in the Presbyterian Church is accepted by all who are in its communion. It is by a like voluntary act that deacons, ruling elders and ministers accept office within the denomination. The State holds men to allegiance, as has been said, whether they will or no. The Church, it would appear, has a yet greater claim upon its members and officers for loyalty to its Standards and its policy than has the State. Voluntary acts constitute a basis for the obligation to loyalty, which cannot be thrust aside by any plea whatsoever.

This loyalty, further, should be and is an intelligent loyalty. The charge is often made that those who accept the Presbyterian system do so, simply because they have been instructed therein in childhood.

It is alleged that they have made for themselves no thorough investigation of its essential principles, but have simply accepted as proven the results of the thought and effort of past generations. Such a charge is untrue to the facts in the case, and unworthy of this investigating age and fair-minded men. While it is true that the past influences the present, the influence of the past upon the present is far too much overrated. The men of this restless time are not like books printed during the Puritan era, and placed upon a shelf to grow yellow with age and dark with the dust of two centuries. Every human generation is new as the grass in springtime. It has its own life, its own environment, its own development. The men of every generation as they grow in years, while thankful for the instruction given by the past, look with open and intelligent eyes at the universe, and all that it contains, and seek for themselves a solution of its mysteries. And those who maintain in this day the great truths of the Presbyterian system, have attained to their convictions, not

alone by the influence of the past, but also, as a rule, by personal examination into the great questions of theology, duty, worship and administration. After due thought, with clear apprehension of the limitations from the side both of the divine word and of human nature, which are ever upon men, the great majority of Calvinists have reached the conclusions which they hold, not because Calvinism is old, but because Calvinism is everlastingly true. Their eyes are not blinded any more than were the eyes of the fathers. They do not even wear their grandfathers' spectacles. They hold fast the great doctrines which are contained within the Standards of the Church, because they have thought themselves through to them, as being the system of truth contained in the Holy Scriptures. Theirs is that intelligent apprehension of truth which is a firm basis for loyal adherence to a great system of faith and practice.

But denominational loyalty should include within its compass something more than the denominational creed, worship and polity. These things are valuable, in

proportion to the extent in which they find expression in denominational work. Just as faith finds evidence in works, so loyalty approves itself by deeds. As a denomination the Presbyterian Church is greatly privileged in many ways. It has established many agencies for the maintenance and extension of Christ's kingdom. It is strong in its Scriptural creed and its popular sympathies; strong also in its relation to the history and development of the land in which God has placed it; strong, in addition, in its hold upon the influential elements in the diverse population of this republic; strong, further, in numbers and in the material, intellectual and moral resources under its control. It possesses kingly principles, historic prestige, far-reaching influence, multiplied resources. Thus equipped of God, it finds before it, as a Church, work of imperial proportions; work not only in foreign lands, but more especially in this land. For the Presbyterian Church, America is but another name for opportunity, and if it would rise to the level of its providential privileges, then,

with all charity towards other denominations of Christians, it should devote its great resources, both of men and means, in the wide dissemination of the truths which it maintains, for the largest possible development of its own institutions. Loyalty to the Presbyterian system involves loyalty to its widespread agencies; demands a persistent, resolute, aggressive movement for the meeting in full, along denominational lines, of denominational responsibilities. It is along these lines that the Presbyterian Church will vindicate to the world its right to exist as a Church, that it will evidence clearly that it has a mission in the earth, that it will rise to the full height both of opportunity and responsibility, that it will effectively aid in the extension and final victory of the Redeemer's kingdom. As a rule, it is true that he is the best Christian, the truest to Christ, who is most loyal to the church in which he finds himself, by choice and by the operation of Divine Providence. What is true of the individual is peculiarly true of the Christian churches. That denomina-

tion is truest to its God-given mission, to the great Christian brotherhood, to the supreme Head of the Church, which is true to its own nature, true to its peculiar principles, and which refuses, with David, to do God's work clad in Saul's armor. The Presbyterian Church, by being true to itself, will be true to Christ.

Thought of Christ suggests instinctively that he is the source of all power. Filled, then, with his Spirit, may his disciples everywhere live and labor, strong in the conviction that if theirs be a true and living faith, then their every effort to serve him shall be crowned with success, not because of what they are, but because his is "the kingdom, the power and the glory."

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